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Mielke, Katja; Grawert, Elke

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Why Afghanistan is not a safe country of origin

Katja Mielke \ BICC

Elke Grawert \ BICC

RECOMMENDATIONS

\ No repatriation of Afghan refugees

Reconstruction and the establishment of peace in Afghanistan have failed. Germany, as party to the intervention, has to accept its share of responsibility for this failure. The German government can do this in their policies towards the Afghan refugees by offering them with prospects both in Germany and in Afghanistan, rather than deporting them.

\ Controlled immigration

With a well-managed immigration system, the German government, governments of the European Union, the OECD and of BRICS countries as well as governments of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries can make an important contribution to the population's security and to overcoming future challenges. Within a relatively short period of time, refugees ought to be able not only to obtain a status that allows them access to education, training and further qualification measures but also to work, which will give them the chance of integrating into host societies. This would also strengthen the potential of Afghans who already live abroad to help and to provide help for their fellow countrymen and –women staying in Afghanistan. In addition, opportunities for immigrants to qualify for legal migration opportunities (through immigration law, for instance) ought to remain open.

\ Long-term, needs-based reconstruction strategy

A long-term, possibly decade-long investment strategy is necessary to support sustainable economic development driven by the internal market and Afghan purchasing power. Development projects must be integrated into this strategy and complement corresponding public measures by the Afghan government while taking into account the need of the private sector for reliable rules and regulations. It is of critical importance to expand and diversify vocational training centres where the Afghan youth can obtain qualifications needed on the internal job market and develop prospects for the future in their country.

\ Accompanying measures: Land and peace

The German government must make greater use of its diplomatic influence in working towards a consensus for a viable roadmap for peace with the participation of the governments of Pakistan, Iran, the United States, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and India. It should also press for legal access to land and housing for all those who have returned and who were displaced within the last 15 years.

Why Afghanistan is not a safe country of origin

In 2015, 150,000 people left Afghanistan for Germany.¹ They fled from prosecution, violence and lack of future prospects in their country—after 15 years of international reconstruction efforts. Now, the German government is planning to repatriate Afghan refugees, some of whom have been living in Germany for years. Political decision-makers speak of intra-state alternatives for the displaced, of secure zones within Afghanistan where they could be deported to. This idea, however, can only be interpreted as empty rhetoric of the German government to show the public that it is working on decreasing the number of refugees in Germany. An increase in bombings, suicide attacks, fighting between the army and the Taliban as well as criminal violence in more and more districts of Afghanistan comes on top of a massive economic crisis, high youth unemployment, forced displacement, land loss and a paralysed political leadership—a situation the authors experienced themselves during their one-month field research in Kabul and Herat in November 2015. The complex insecurity situation, in which the Afghan population finds itself after the withdrawal of the international engagement in Afghanistan in 2014, is obvious. Germany must bear its share of responsibility for this by promoting future prospects for Afghan refugees in Germany rather than pushing for deportations.

Physical insecurity: Victims of political violence and displacement

Since 2014, the security situation has worsened rapidly and remains highly precarious. In large cities, such as Kabul (approx. four million inhabitants), Jalalabad (more than 350,000) and Herat (more than 800,000), every day, citizens are at risk of becoming victims of suicide bombers or of being kidnapped. In Kabul alone, four large bombings occurred in the first five weeks of the year 2016. In the rural areas, insecurity grew after the strategic (re-)armament of formerly disarmed

militias in the past years. The consequence of far-reaching criminality and the intimidation of the rural population

as well as irregular taxation of rural produce through local militias is that no one can afford to be ‚neutral‘.

In the south and east of Afghanistan as in the districts surrounding the large cities, merciless fighting between armed Taliban groups and the army as well as international troops is taking place. Travelling outside of these cities is highly dangerous. Besides various Taliban factions, numerous other armed groups fight against the state and, in part, against each other.² In 2014, 12,500 soldiers and police officers died; in 2015, the number increased to 16,000. The number of civilian victims of the conflict has been steadily rising since 2009. Until June 2016, the UN counted 22,941 civilian deaths and 40,993 injured. The numbers rose in 2014 and 2015, with, 3,700 civilians killed and more than 6,800 injured in 2014 and 3,545 killed and 7,457 injured in 2015. In the first half of 2016, 122 violent attacks were claimed by the Taliban, of which 71 targeted security forces and 51 civilians. So-called Islamic State killed 122 civilians in the same period, during which the total number of civilian deaths through armed groups amounted to 1,601 whereas 3,565 were severely injured.³ The temporary seizure of Kunduz by the Taliban at the end of September 2015 and again in October 2016 are thus not exceptions but rather reflect the increased degree of violence.

The rising amount of armed violence was responsible for the displacement of another 158,000 people in the first half of 2016. With this, the official figure of internally displaced people in Afghanistan directly resulting from violent conflicts has exceeded 1.2 million.⁴ People

1 \ From January to April 2016, another 29,641 Afghan refugees filed their first asylum application in Germany (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge. 2016. „Aktuelle zahlen zu Asyl.“ April, p. 8. http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Downloads/Infothek/Statistik/Asyl/aktuelle-zahlen-zu-asyl-april-2016.pdf?__blob=publicationFile, accessed 28 October 2016.

2 \ According to a September 2015 UN Assessment quoted in the media, since the summer of 2015, 25 of the 34 provinces showed signs of the presence of so-called Islamic State (IS) (<http://news.yahoo.com/islamic-stategaininggroundafghanistanun235952988.html>). The significance of IS is controversial; in particular the relationship between the Taliban and IS.

3 \ All figures from UNAMA/UNHCR. 2016. „Afghanistan Midyear Report 2016. Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict. July, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_midyear_report_2016_final.pdf, accessed 28.10.2016.

4 \ As a result of natural catastrophes (earth quakes), another 130,000 are displaced (International Organization for Migration, 2016).

fled mostly to the capitals of the provinces or left their home regions entirely. Stricter migration regulations and the ensuing discrimination of Afghans in the neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Iran reduce regional options for those who flee. About 1.5 million registered Afghan refugees have lived in Pakistan for years; in Iran, 950,000 Afghans were still registered by mid-2015. The number of unreported cases of Afghans who live illegally in the neighbouring countries is substantially higher; in Pakistan, the estimated number is about 1.5 million, between 1.4 and two million in Iran. They are also victims of discrimination and persecution. Many of these migrants have not only fled and returned from one region of Afghanistan or a neighbouring country once but multiple times.

Economic insecurity

International donor and aid organizations have provided the Afghan government under Hamid Karzai (2002–2014) with significant financial support after the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, driving the restructuring of the country into a liberal market economy. When the international forces and organizations were reduced in Afghanistan in 2014, it became clear that the economy had been mainly reliant on orders from the alliance and that economic sustainability or even a self-sustaining restructuring process had never been achieved. Growth rates that had fluctuated around 10 per cent since 2005 already dropped to nearly two per cent in 2013—in anticipation of the withdrawal—and since 2014 have been close to zero. Construction, transportation, logistics and service companies as well as security providers had been major contributors to the strong economic growth. They were founded as a response to the high demand for modern buildings, the expansion of infrastructure, delivery of goods for international employees and providing protection to these employees through private security companies. Increasingly, these companies in particular fall victim to attacks by the Taliban, who consider them to be collaborators with international troops and organizations. In 2015, many of these companies were facing bankruptcy due to the lack of customers and had to suspend

nearly all of their staff.⁵ The threatened closure of these companies constituted a blow to the Afghan economy, which risked losing an important stake in the production and service sectors. Only a new beginning of long-term investment programmes in the framework of a coherent overall international donor strategy could prevent such a blow from happening. Such a strategy should not only foster predictability and offer perspectives but also make sure that there are opportunities for employment, vocational training and professionalization.

The faltering economic policy of the ‘unity government’ under the leadership of Ashraf Ghani und Abdullah Abdullah (since 2014) does not improve the situation either. After more than a year in office, it has become increasingly uncertain whether Afghan President Ghani’s reform agenda with the promising title “Realizing Self-Reliance” will actually be implemented. In 2015, 71 per cent of the state budget depended on foreign money. Import and export companies, such as transport businesses, deplore the open corruption at border crossings that prevents exact cost calculations. Many have been struggling for survival since 2014 and only employ their staff on a daily basis.⁶ Monetary transfers of the drug and contraband economy, lacking capacities of the finance authorities and opaque levies of taxes and duties increase mistrust in the state. Yet the labour market is not the only factor through which the population is affected by the economic decline and the lack of investments. Increasing fuel prices as well as high rates of inflation increasing the price of food make life even more difficult. So far, the State has hardly been seen to engage in the fight against poverty or in the support of development and reform—one effect of its market orientation.

5 \ Result of interviews with company owners in Kabul, Nangahar, Herat and Kandahar by the research team (BICC, TLO and International Alert) in 2015 in the framework of the research project, funded by the NWO-WOTRO, <https://www.bicc.de/researchthemes/project/project/conflictsensitiveemploymentunderconstructionpeaceandstability-strategiesfortheprivatesec/>

6 \ cf. footnote 5.

It is therefore clear that for the German government and the international community, a gradual reduction of their financial commitment has significant consequences. What is needed is a long-term reconstruction strategy to repair the damages caused by ten years of economic development geared to the self-interest of internationals, and to introduce a sound, sustainable development plan created by the internal market and Afghan purchasing power. It is not enough to carry out diverse individual development projects—on the contrary: they will have to be embedded in this very strategy and complement corresponding public measures of the Afghan government and the private sector.

Fear and lack of prospects

The uneven distribution of access to land and property is one of the greatest problems in Afghanistan. The demographic growth during decades of war has led to the fact that returning families bring with them new generations of children and grandchildren who also raise a claim to former land, of which only a small part (if at all) is left. In the urban centres of Afghanistan, large sections of the population who, due to unlawful occupation of their land by neighbours, family members or violent actors (local warlords, security forces), cannot return to their original homes and have hardly any prospects of reclaiming their livelihoods in the country. This is a major factor for conflict escalation.

In Kabul alone, more than 40,000 families live in more than 50 so-called camps on state and privately-owned spaces devoid of any rights because they are not tolerated anywhere else. Amongst them are returnees from various repatriation waves from Pakistan and Iran, internally displaced people from war zones, economic refugees and landless peasants from poorer provinces of Afghanistan as well as the urban poor. A large part of these families had heeded the call of former Interim President Karzai to return to their home country and to rebuild it. Fourteen years later, many are still waiting for land allocations that they had been promised (even those who had owned no land before, such as former nomads). For many internally displaced

persons, a piece of land on which they can live without having to fear further displacement is the foundation upon which they could begin to create a source of income.⁷ Their disappointment has become even greater since Ashraf Ghani, who was elected President in 2014, has not taken any steps thus far to keep his campaign promise to provide displaced people with access to land and ownership titles. At the same time, the illegal appropriation of land—lucrative plots in urban areas or along arterial roads, but also farming land—by influential persons has reached a scale never before seen. The government has shown itself to be incapable of curbing these land grabbing practices. Based on the long-standing cooperation with international economic organizations and the Afghan government, the German government ought to encourage the Afghan government to make legal access to land and housing for the displaced and returnees possible.

Given that the Afghan Government does not have a monopoly of violence, the principle of , might is right' rules in Afghanistan. Patronage and patron–client relationships prevail, and families are searching for the protection of the most powerful patron to minimize the risks against them. Even though the constitution explicitly stresses gender equality, massive human rights violations, such as honour killings, forced and child marriages as well as the trafficking of girls and women are common. In cases where violence against women has been committed, the victims have hardly any chance of reporting it; violent crime in general is hardly ever prosecuted. Due to political instability and the power struggles of diverse actors, the state can hardly guarantee the right to physical well-being. Women experience violence and discrimination in their families, but also in the political and economic spheres where gender equality is sadly lacking.

7 \ Outcome of interviews conducted by the authors in irregular settlements in Kabul in the framework of research projects supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) <https://www.bicc.de/researchthemes/project/project/protectedratherthanprotractedstrengtheningrefugeesandpeace122/> sowie https://www.bicc.de/researchthemes/project/project/crossroadsasia_research-networkonconflictmigrationanddevelopment127/.

Offering prospects for future wellbeing has become a matter of urgency given that Afghanistan has an above average number of young people: 46.2 per cent of the population or 12.3 million Afghans are 14 years and younger. Young people need educational support as well as vocational training programmes, measures to promote employment and education not only in Afghanistan itself but also in Germany, Europe and neighbouring countries. Legal access to labour markets abroad can make a strong contribution to removing the complex insecurity situation in Afghanistan. Vocational training and job creation schemes in Afghanistan must be long-term, coherent and strategically adaptable to the constantly changing realities in the country. Close cooperation between the local economy, international aid and economic organizations as well as investors, the relevant ministries in Afghanistan, chambers and associations as well as advisory institutions is advisable. Financial transfers and investments by Afghans who already live abroad ought to be viewed as further support measures and therefore facilitated.

Dilemmas of external support and assistance

German policymakers interpreted the temporary seizure of Kunduz by the Taliban in autumn 2015 as evidence that the international community was wrong about in the timing of troop withdrawal and how prepared the Afghan population was to provide for its own security. This interpretation is cynical when one considers the effect of contradicting practices of the intervening parties in Afghanistan, which have reinvigorated armed opponents of the government and spread local insecurity. Over the course of reconstruction, military and civilian actors have dealt with potentates—partially without further thought and at best naively—who pursued their own personal interests (local warlords, perpetrators of human rights crimes, Taliban, corrupt state officials and other local, not legitimized representatives) and provided them with good money. Examples of this are military and supply convoys that gave the Taliban huge amounts of money for safe passage on a stretch of road, or building companies and their clients that paid for

the opportunity to build a road or a bazaar as a ‚shining example‘ in a certain area. Furthermore, development cooperation agencies and the military rented properties at exorbitant prices from powerful local players who had no legitimacy among the population. By arming militias—for guarding infrastructure projects and, as of 2009, for a more intensified counterinsurgency in various districts—, international actors have significantly contributed to multiplying the number of violent conflicts and those who participated in them.

These practices have given the wrong signal to the Afghan people who initially had high hopes of the rule of law and democracy. They represent blatant double standards that apparently do not take the population's needs and entitlement to justice and public participation seriously. Investments were made in infrastructure in particularly conflict-ridden areas rather than in the people of Afghanistan. This has made the use of violence profitable and peace disadvantageous with regard to attracting development and infrastructure investments. Finally, the short-term character of projects, the pressure to show success and to spend donor money on programme officials has led to interventions that proceed without sufficient knowledge of the situation, and without any impact on the long-term stabilization of Afghanistan.

Given the increasing success of the Taliban in seizing larger areas and even entire cities, it has become clear that the reconstruction process in the country has failed. However, even today the international community, aid organizations and the military who intervened in Afghanistan in the framework of ISAF⁸ from 2001 to 2014 still tend towards presenting ‘project Afghanistan’ as a success. The actual role of the intervening actors is concealed again by current statements such as that by the German Development Minister who stated that without security, further civilian development in the country is impossible.⁹

8 \ NATOled International Security Assistance Force.

9 \ “Minister Müller: Sicherheit in Afghanistan ist Grundlage für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung”, BMZ 18 November 2015, www.bmz.de

The structural challenges in the country—at present discussed under the topic of causes of displacement and how to counteract them—can be neither solved by military means nor by development cooperation, least of all by deportations (“repatriation”) that, apparently, are supposed to stop the ‘brain drain’. Instead, the German government as well as those of the European Union, the OECD, BRICS and neighbouring countries of Afghanistan could make major contributions to security by creating well-managed immigration systems. Within a short period of time, refugees ought to be able to obtain a status that allows them access to education, training and further qualification measures as well as work as migrants, which will give them the chance of integrating into host societies. Opportunities for immigrants to temporarily qualify for legal migration (through immigration law, for instance) ought to remain open.

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bicc \
Internationales Konversionszentrum Bonn
Bonn International Center for Conversion GmbH

Pfarrer-Byns-Straße 1, 53121 Bonn, Germany
+49 (0)228 911 96-0, Fax -22, bicc@bicc.de

www.bicc.de
www.facebook.com/bicc.de

bicc Bonn
International Center
for Conversion \

Director for Research
Prof. Dr. Conrad Schetter

Director for Administration
Michael Dedek

AUTHORS

Dr Katja Mielke
Senior Researcher/ BICC

Dr Elke Grawert
Senior Researcher / BICC

EDITOR
Susanne Heinke

TRANSLATION
Heike Webb

SUPPORT
Elvan Isikozlu

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